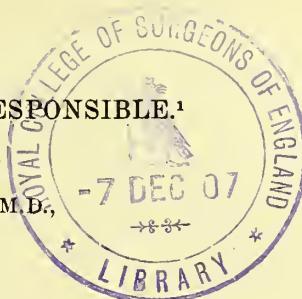


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THE UNRECOGNIZED IRRESPONSIBLE.¹

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THE most pitiable fruit of the times, so marked by evasion of law, looseness of manners and morals, laxity of marriage ties, of home rule, and of self-restraint, is the CHILD; and juvenile courts (a thing unheard of in the past), overcrowded hospitals and institutions, records of thousands of defectives yet uncared for—an unstable element too often reproducing itself, and wrecking continual disaster to society—attest to the number of victims. “What shall we do with it?” is the question of the hour. For ignorance and inability to grasp the situation are constantly creating fresh complications.

A clear note of warning which we, out of our experience, sounded some years since, is beginning to be heard, although I fear much mischief will be wrought through ignorance and misapprehension, before its true meaning is recognized, and carried forward in the way which that experience dictates. “Diseases desperate grown, are by desperate remedies relieved or,” mark you, “not at all.”

Many years since I pointed out that these, for the class morally or mentally defective, could be found only in separation, asexualization, and permanent sequestration; but egotism, ignorance, the cowardice of political leaders, and the sentimental gush which defeats so often the aims of charity refuse also to accept the physician’s diagnosis.

England has led the way in the first of these—an example which we begin to follow—in the establishment of schools and classes for backward children, but, always conservative, has yet to take up the others, without which, for the absolute defective, the first is worse than useless. It may be that the quieter life of the British Isles does not tend to the production of that extreme type of defect demanding heroic measures of relief as do, undoubtedly, conditions existing in America. At least we meet with no such evidence in mass there, as our juvenile courts present, of the irresponsible defective of the criminal type, which is the class we will

¹ Read at the National Conference on the Education of Backward, Truant, and Delinquent Children, at Philadelphia, Pa., May 7th, 1906.

consider to-day. The victim alike of fateful heredity and unhealthy environment, this unfortunate seems doomed to be doubly and perpetually misunderstood. The idea of a human being existing without the moral sense is one difficult for the ordinary layman to grasp. To some, it is equivalent to being born without a soul; and although many do often assert that very thing of savages and of certain backward races, that the spiritual nature is the last to be developed, yet they do not know, and cannot be convinced, that there are people of apparent average intelligence living in their midst who must be forever deaf to moral suasion, because they have no moral nature to be appealed to. As rudderless ships, these derelicts on the vast ocean of life drift at the mercy of the elements, a peril to all in their path. This is more literal than figurative, and if the mind of the public would but accept it, the work of rescue, and of a two-fold protection, would be materially hastened.

It is needless to speak of reformatories. These may reshape a deformed nature, perhaps recover what has been lost, but never yet have they recreated what never existed; and with this element they may dig deep and patiently, yet never find the moral soil in which good principles may take root and grow. It is not there, and never has been. Call him a monstrosity if you will, but accept it as a fact, nevertheless, for the basis of your work, for the safety of society as well of the unfortunate, who—paradoxical as it may appear—will find in this recognition his only protection. The moral imbecile is more irresponsible than the insane, who in lucid intervals is naturally dominated and led, to some extent at least, by principles and habits of life founded upon moral law, that have become in a measure automatic. Of these the moral imbecile is as destitute as is a desert of vegetation. He has never been swayed by anything but the impulse to satisfy exaggerated evil desires. He is therefore the slave of egotism and the creature of opportunity, with no will-power to resist suggestion, no past to sustain him, and wholly indifferent to a to-morrow; even if it present the scaffold or the penitentiary, he would not realize it, but trust to some chance to evade it.

Kleptomania is, with many of this class, not a mania, but a natural quality, so to speak, just as any cardinal virtue is to any normal person. It is really not mania, but a perverted instinct; so much so, that we have many instances where the utmost ingenuity and even forethought will be exercised in gaining possession of some object which, as soon as acquired, immediately becomes valueless, or, if burdensome, is given or thrown away or buried out of sight, and the energies of the individual immediately concentrated upon some new scheme. In the same way prevarication, or illogical lying, has a greater fascination than straightforwardness and truth could have for the most saintly, and they will retreat from one position to another, and in the end unhesitatingly acknowledge the whole fabrication.

The sexual impulses are exaggerated in all grades of moral imbecility, but

in the lower tend to brutishness and a revelling in obscenity and indecency, even to the eating of garbage and filth of all kinds. In addition to all this, he exhibits an absence of will-power, a morbid obstinacy in regard to law and order, and a ready obedience to evil suggestions, making him the slave of a higher and brighter grade who have a positive genius for ill. With no past and no future, unrestrained by regret or anticipation, with no hope, no fear, no abiding sense of right, with exaggerated impulses, always towards evil, and often a powerful heredity urging to some special form of vice, is the fact not patent that these unfortunates are not criminal because they are altogether irresponsible? And yet the law, which discriminates between crimes committed with or without evil intent, is absolutely ignorant of those committed because of an entire absence of a restraining moral sense; a fall as innocent as that of the blind who stumble in the noon-day glare to their own undoing—nor will judge or jury believe it. Yes, I make an exception, for only a few years since I was fortunate in convincing a jury of the complete irresponsibility of a boy arraigned for murder. One of them told me that after my evidence, they simply could not bring in any other verdict, and even then the child was only saved from the scaffold by being declared *insanus*, the law making no provision for imbecility. We provide largely and liberally for the insane—the safety of society demands it, it may be said—yet this form of defect is more dangerous than insanity, because so often unrecognized, especially when associated, as it sometimes is, with great personal beauty, a pleasing address, or some special inherited talent. Its presence in the family and the school is a grief, often a terror, from which death is welcome to bring release, if indeed it does not first bring death or serious disaster to others.

Yet, on the other hand, we will find parents hoping against hope, and removing children after a period in a training school, unwilling to accept the assurance that it will bring only trouble to the home and to the child, who will miss the accustomed restraint and the companionship of his fellows; and that liberty for him will undoubtedly degenerate into license. We are not surprised, therefore, at the various reports that come back to us of such cases. For example, one boy deemed by his father capable of assisting him in his livery stable, immediately began charging double fares and pocketing the difference, to the consternation of the patrons and, later, of the father.

In a village some painters, unsuspecting, left their paints out over night, with the result that the neighbors' fences bloomed out in colors more brilliant than artistic. One of our former pupils, also graduated by his fond parent, when accused, stoutly denied the impeachment, until his egotism could not stand the temptation, and boastingly he admitted: "I bossed the job. A boss don't work,

so I didn't do it." Yet another, removed by his father, was in the habit of borrowing any team he saw standing hitched, and his mother was so miserable between her fears for the boy, the visits of the police, and the fines she had to pay, that she took positive comfort in the thought that her other boy, an epileptic idiot in one of our custodial buildings, was protected and safe from harm.

A moral imbecile of high grade started out on his career at five years of age by shooting his sister. After giving an unlimited amount of trouble at home, he was placed in a training school, from which, after rapid mental improvement, he was withdrawn, and is to-day serving a term in a western penitentiary for forgery. Another—the victim of an heredity of insanity—removed from an institution in spite of all protests, some twenty years ago, has during that period been thrice incarcerated in an insane asylum, arrested four times, and is at present serving out a four-years' sentence, fully recognized in the penitentiary as a mental defective. Yet another—the son of a ballet-dancer and a dissolute nobleman—immoral and dishonest, has been frequently detected in forgery, and influence alone has saved him from the extreme penalty of the law. In every case the mental defect, though pronounced, has been entirely subordinated to the moral defect.

To the oft-repeated and very natural query as to how to discriminate between the criminal and the irresponsible, the reply is, that it must be borne in mind that the irresponsible is always mentally as well as morally defective, incapable of any continued logical reasoning or action. Thus while most ingenious in planning and carrying out a design, he is by simple suggestion easily betrayed into confession. Again, that egotism peculiar to the imbecile is always urging him to boast of an achievement, regardless of consequences. Henderson, as I described him, was a fair type. "A series of contradictions, he is tender and cruel, ingenious and crafty, phlegmatic and nervous, unfeeling and yet affectionate; he is open, frank, artless, secretive, shy, deceitful, truthful in many ways, but also an accomplished liar. Thus atavism and environment have combined to form a moral imbecile, in whom the moral sense or faculty is either blunted or altogether absent."

Impossible in the schools and backward classes, drifting into the truant schools, frequently in evidence in the juvenile courts, these children are an equally disturbing element in houses of refuge, in reformatories, and in training schools. With us, after a trial in the training department, there is nothing left for us but to consign him to a custodial building, which, not designed for this class, has neither the opportunities for training, for occupations, for amusements adapted to his needs, nor the proper facilities for his control.

It does seem that such demand from so many sources would show the necessity for a colony reservation for the permanent sequestration of moral defectives, with

sex separation complete and entire. This should be so devised and arranged as to avoid all appearance or suggestion of a penitentiary, for it must be borne in mind that its inmates are not criminals, but victims, to whom is due every amelioration of living in exchange for the liberty which would be a menace to themselves and to society. Ample space would be required, providing for schools, for training in various industries, for atheletic sports, and other amusements. Buildings also should be so constructed, and inmates gathered into small groups, as to give as much a sense of family life as would be consistent with proper safeguarding. This should be still further assured in the selection of capable and refined house-mothers, teachers, and attendants.

Asexualization should be the law of such institutions, not only assuring to the individual release in large measure from exaggerated impulses and desires, but also the safety of society in event of a possible escape. Here, withdrawn from temptations and constantly attracted to congenial and useful occupations, tending always towards the good, the true, and the beautiful in nature and art; in such an atmosphere the unfortunate would come to find his compensation and life-happiness in concentration and conservation of energy, while society and the homes would be relieved of a burden at a cost which, compared with the present and all its attendant risks, would be indeed trivial.

